

LETTERS

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FIRST SIGHT RECORD OF THE KING VULTURE IN BAJA CALIFORNIA, MEXICO

On 31 October 1999 from 0900–1130 H, we observed a solitary adult King Vulture (*Sarcoramphus papa*) at San José del Cabo Estuary, Baja California Sur, Mexico (23°03'N, 109°41'W; elevation just above sea level). The estuary is located just east of the Presidente Forum Los Cabos resort about 1.0 km southeast of San José del Cabo and is in a tropical and semiarid portion of the Baja California peninsula where the Río San José meets the Pacific Ocean. Maya et al. (1997, pages 5–25 in L. Arriaga and R.R. Estrella [Eds.], *Los oasis de la Península de Baja California*. Centro de Investigaciones Biológicas del Noroeste, S.C., La Paz, B.C.S., México) provides a more complete description of this estuary.

The King Vulture was observed roosting along with numerous Turkey Vultures (*Cathartes aura*) in a dense grove of Mexican fan palms (*Washingtonia robusta*) that bordered a part of the estuary. According to Howell and Webb (1995, *A guide to the birds of Mexico and northern Central America*. Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, U.K.), adult King Vultures are “unmistakable” and “usually seen singly,” and the species “associates with other vultures.” Although not photographed or collected, the King Vulture that we saw was easily separable from the Turkey Vultures roosting in the area. It was definitely larger than the Turkey Vultures and was aggressive towards them, apparently to acquire better sunning sites. The white wing feathers except for the main flight feathers that were black were easily observed while the bird extended its wings to thermoregulate in the morning sun. After returning from the field and reviewing Eitniear (1996, *J. Raptor Res.* 30:35–38), we determined that the King Vulture was an adult in definitive plumage, approximately 6–7 yr old. Its multicolored head was also easily seen, especially the portions that were orange. Our viewing distance was less than 150 m with the sun to our backs, and we used 8 × 42 binoculars. It was impossible to reduce the viewing distance for photographic purposes because of an intervening wetland.

To our knowledge, this represents the first report of the King Vulture in Baja California. Brewster (1902, *Bull. Mus. Comp. Zool.* 41:1–241), Grinnell (1928, *Univ. Calif. Publ. Zool.* 32:1–300), Wilbur (1987, *Birds of Baja California*. Univ. of Calif. Press, Berkeley, CA U.S.A.), Howell and Webb (1995), and American Ornithologists' Union (1998, *Checklist of North American birds*, 7th Ed. Am. Ornithol. Union, Washington, DC U.S.A.) did not list the King Vulture from Baja California. Howell and Webb (1995) state that the King Vulture is a rare lowland species that is decreasing in numbers, and their range map depicts the species' former distribution in western Mexico to as far north as central Sinaloa near the Culiacan area. The 300 km distance between the mainland in Sinaloa, México and the Cape region of Baja California Sur is not all that far for a species with the presumed flight range of the King Vulture. We could not relocate it on a brief visit to the same site two days later and biologists from the Centro de Investigaciones Biológicas del Noroeste, La Paz, Baja California Sur did not observe it there some weeks following our initial observation (R.R. Estrella pers. comm.). It is not known whether this King Vulture observation represents a natural “accidental” record or an escapee from captivity. It seems unlikely that it could have been the latter because no one knew of a King Vulture held in captivity in the Santiago Zoo or elsewhere in Baja California (R.R. Estrella and A.C. Vera pers. comm.). It was also unlikely that it could have escaped from a zoo in California because none were reported and most are kept in “double-door” facilities and California has one of the most restrictive state wildlife regulations in the U.S. (J. Bellinger pers. comm.). It is, of course, possible the bird originated from an area in the west outside of California where wildlife regulations are less restrictive. However, we feel that this was not an escaped King Vulture that we observed in Baja California but was, in fact, a free living bird well away from its usual range in mainland Mexico.

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